

# GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS AND THE OPERATIONAL APPROACH OF ATTRITION IN THE VIETNAM WAR

A Monograph

by

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## ABSTRACT

GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS AND THE OPERATIONAL APPROACH OF ATTRITION IN THE VIETNAM WAR, by MAJ Thom Duffy Frohnhoefer, 51 pages.

General Creighton Abrams assumed command of United States forces in the Republic of South Vietnam in the summer of 1968. In recent years, this change in leadership has been viewed as a radical departure from the operational approach implemented by his predecessor General William Westmoreland. This monograph proposes that the United States Armed Forces consistently followed a strategy of attrition from the introduction of battalion sized combat troops in 1965, through the Westmoreland-Abrams transition, and ultimately encouraged the South Vietnamese to follow this strategy during the period of Vietnamization.

The National Command Authority and General Westmoreland specifically adopted a strategy of attrition in February of 1966. The Military Assistance Command Vietnam implemented this strategy throughout 1966 and accelerated the strategy in 1967, when General Abrams became General Westmoreland's deputy commander. The operations were specifically designed to attrite Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular forces as outlined in the 1966 meeting. The Tet offensive of January 1968 appeared to discredit the strategy of attrition and contributed to the ouster of Westmoreland and his replacement by General Abrams.

General Abrams promoted a "one-war" strategy which had the desired end state of population security for the people of South Vietnam. In reality the "one-war" was a multi-tiered strategy of attrition. While the tactics of large scale search and destroy missions were modified, the operational purpose was not. Simultaneously, the Phoenix Program conducted constant low level attrition warfare at the village level to prevent the resurgence of the Viet Cong.

While these operations were being conducted the national command authority adopted the policy of Vietnamization in the summer of 1969. The training of South Vietnamese forces was predicated on their capability to conduct attrition warfare upon the departure of American forces. The proof of principle was OPERATION LAM SON in 1971. This operation reflects the emphasis placed on conducting offensive attrition based operations rather than pacification warfare.

In conclusion this monograph emphasizes the continuity of American strategy in the Republic of South Vietnam. Despite claims of a radical shift to counter-insurgency and pacification operations, General Abrams continued a consistent strategy he inherited from his predecessor, in turn he passed it on to the South Vietnamese. The implications of this conclusion are two fold. The first is that any limited success achieved by the United States Armed Forces in South Vietnam was a result of attrition not counter-insurgency and that the ultimate failure was the inability to transition from attrition to maneuver. The second is that a change in leadership in a theater of limited war may be cosmetic and not reflect new ideas and policies, but merely a change in personalities.

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Thanks to my wife, Audrey.

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## INTRODUCTION

General Creighton Abrams assumed command of United States forces in the Republic of South Vietnam in the late spring of 1968. This change in leadership has been seen in recent years as a radical departure from the operational framework conducted by his predecessor General William Westmoreland.<sup>1</sup> This monograph proposes that the United States Armed Forces consistently followed a strategy of attrition from the introduction of battalion sized combat troops in 1965, through the Westmoreland-Abrams transition, and ultimately encouraged the South Vietnamese to follow this strategy during the period of Vietnamization.

Before providing evidence that supports this thesis, definitions of terms that are critical to the understanding of the problem are presented. First and foremost is the meaning of attrition which has numerous interpretations and implications.<sup>2</sup> These implications have changed throughout the course of military history and have caused the term attrition to be used as a pejorative, particularly in the wake of the First World War.<sup>3</sup> When the term attrition is introduced to the complicated lexicon of counterinsurgency it becomes even more difficult to define. Counterinsurgency scholar Andrew Birtle believes that “more than fifty terms (are used) to describe the military’s many counterinsurgency functions, an estimate that is probably too low.”<sup>4</sup> This document will focus on the term pacification and its links to attrition.

The strategy of attrition was first enumerated by Hans Delbrück in his seminal *History of*

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<sup>1</sup>Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (Orlando: Harcourt Press, 1999), 17-18.

<sup>2</sup>J. Boone Bartholmees, Jr., “The Issue of Attrition,” *Parameters* Volume L, no.1 Spring 2010:5.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2006), 3.

*the Art of War* published at the turn of the last century. While the concept of attrition existed since the dawn of warfare, Delbrück gave it a definition and devoted the subject to significant analysis. In his words, the practitioner of attrition does, “not so much place his hopes on completely defeating the enemy as on wearing him out and exhausting him by blows and destruction of all kinds to the extent that in the end he prefers to accept the conditions of the victor.”<sup>5</sup> Delbrück derives his understanding of attrition from his interpretation of the writings of Carl von Clausewitz as reflected in his study of Frederick the Great in the Seven Years War.

Delbrück sees the possibility of a commander adopting two distinct strategies, the strategy of annihilation or the strategy of attrition. Delbrück states that he “coined this phrase (strategy of attrition) as the opposite of Clausewitz’s expression ‘strategy of annihilation.’”<sup>6</sup> Bartholomees sums up the strategy of annihilation as “the idea that a single event or a short series of directly related events can produce a victory.”<sup>7</sup> Attrition takes two forms. Classic attrition is the “destruction of the enemy’s military forces over time in a series of perhaps unrelated battles and campaigns.”<sup>8</sup> Exhaustion is the cumulative effect of the destruction of resources along with the weakening of the enemy military, in other words a multi-tiered target and effect.<sup>9</sup>

The idea of attrition was not attractive to military thinkers during Delbrück’s era but as a result of the First World War many theorists saw no other way to defeat a like sized Army. This was true even in the American Army. Colonel William K. Naylor in his Principles of War class at

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<sup>5</sup>Hans Delbrück, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, Translated by Walter J Renfroe, Jr., (Lincoln:University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 294.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 379.

<sup>7</sup>Bartholomees, *The Issue of Attrition*, 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.,12.

the Army War College in 1922 stated that “the controversy between the strategy of attrition and the strategy of annihilation is of long standing … The great generals of history were not per se proponents of the strategy of attrition or of the strategy of annihilation … but acted … according to circumstances.”<sup>10</sup> The most important factor was meeting the enemy and destroying him with the knowledge that bloodshed was necessary. This theory of annihilation if possible and attrition if necessary was captured in FM 100-5, *Field Service Regulations (Tentative), Operations, 1939.*<sup>11</sup> The next half century saw additional changes to the United States Army understanding of attrition.

The most critical change was the elaboration of the terms strategy, operations, and tactics. Simply put, attrition was no longer seen under the rubric of strategy but classified as a defeat mechanism.<sup>12</sup> Brigadier General HubaWass de Czege identified three defeat mechanisms as attrition, dislocation and disintegration. Attrition focused on the destruction of the enemy’s physical sources of power, disintegration the morale of the combatants, and dislocation the morale of the leadership. Under this model attrition was seen as the least attractive defeat mechanism based on the time and effort which it requires.<sup>13</sup> While the Army adopted the notion of defeat mechanisms, it is important to note that they did not enshrine attrition as one of them. Destroy was used as a substitute, but with the qualification that destruction can occur over time or

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1973), 220.

<sup>11</sup>War Department, *FM 100-5 Tentative Field Service Regulations, Operations* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 1939), 161-164.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. DeLancey, “Adopting the Brigadier General (Retired) Huba Wass de Czege Model of Defeat Mechanisms Based on Historical Evidence and Current Need,” (School of Advanced Military Studies Monograph: Fort Leavenworth, 2001), 8.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 27-28.

quickly.<sup>14</sup>

The meaning of attrition has maintained some consistency since the time of Delbrück. The common recurring elements are time and physical destruction of the military capabilities of the adversary. A critical absence is the mention of death or killing. While realistically the destruction of the enemy armed forces will involve the shedding of blood as seen in the period between the World Wars, it is not the *sine qua non* of attrition. This is perhaps the crux of the misunderstanding of attrition as practiced in the Vietnam War. This monograph defines attrition as the destruction of military capability over time.

Another important term which must be defined before investigating the nature of operations in Vietnam is pacification. Andrew Birtle provides a useful definition in the introduction to his history of counterinsurgency doctrine. Pacification “encompasses a broad array of civil, administrative, and constabulary functions designed to establish or maintain governmental authority in an area that is either openly or potentially hostile.”<sup>15</sup> This definition creates a distinction between the military aspect of counterinsurgency and the civil, but does not imply that there is no link. The debate on the linkage<sup>16</sup> will be crucial to understanding the perceived differences between the Westmoreland and Abrams operational approach.

The terms attrition and pacification have been used as weapons in the ongoing historical debate about the conduct of America’s war in Vietnam. In order to understand the context of this monograph, a brief discussion of the historiography of the war is in order. It follows an arc from criticism of operations during and immediately after the war, to a reassessment of the successes

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<sup>14</sup>Department of the Army, *FM 3-07, Stability Operations* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2008), 4-09.

<sup>15</sup>Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942-1976*, 4.

<sup>16</sup>Sorley, *A Better War* 18.

achieved in South Vietnam to the current debate over what these successes and failures mean in the context of our ongoing guerilla wars. Regardless of the debate, it remains an immutable fact that the United States lost the war in Vietnam. It did not achieve its goal of a peaceful, independent and democratic South Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

The initial analysis of American operations in Vietnam was launched by Colonel Harry Summers in 1982, when he published *On Strategy: a Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*. While a useful work, it promoted a view that whatever the operational approach American forces used in Vietnam it was irrelevant because of a flawed strategy.<sup>18</sup> In this sense it was little different from earlier works which criticized the national command authority from the President down to senior military leaders.<sup>19</sup> The real discussion of the American operational approach in South Vietnam begins with General Bruce Palmer's *The 25-Year War*.

The work was published to little fanfare (particularly in comparison with Summers' work) in 1984. The book was written "to show how the war was conducted in the theater of operations."<sup>20</sup> Palmer's book was unique for the time. It devoted over half the text to the post Tet offensive period and devoted comparatively little space to the reasons for going to war. This kept the work at the operational level (primarily, he devotes a chapter to strategy) and he addresses the issue of attrition in the context of the guidance of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Military

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<sup>17</sup>Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ix-x.

<sup>18</sup>Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (United States: Presidio Press, 1995), 183-184.

<sup>19</sup> Most prominently David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (New York:Ballantine Books,1992).

<sup>20</sup> General Bruce Palmer, Jr, *The 25-Year War, America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1984), viii.

Assistance Command-Vietnam.<sup>21</sup> Palmer also discusses the character of General Westmoreland and General Abrams. Of note is his discussion of General Abrams “‘father-savior-hero’ image in Vietnam”<sup>22</sup> partly due to his premature death. This image would have staying power.

The limitations of Palmer, Summers and Lieutenant General Philip Davidson<sup>23</sup> were apparent to their readers. All had been officers of some prominence during or immediately after the war. Andrew Krepinevich did not have this limitation. As a young Major he published *The Army and Vietnam* in 1986. His thesis was harshly critical of the strategy of attrition and he puts the responsibility for the approach on hide-bound army regulars who disregarded the counter-insurgency doctrine of the United States Special Forces.<sup>24</sup> He did not believe that General Abrams changed the operational approach in Vietnam and that any success he had was accidental or due to civilian pacification efforts.<sup>25</sup> Notably he devotes little attention to the post Tet offensive period and summarizes the Cambodian operation in a sentence.

Contrast this with Lewis Sorley who criticizes these authorial choices in the prologue to his *A Better War*, published in 1999.<sup>26</sup> Sorley has dedicated years to his thesis that General Creighton Abrams fundamentally changed the operational approach in Vietnam from attrition to security and would have achieved final victory if not for strategic changes in national policy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>23</sup> Davidson was the MAC-V G2 and served under both Westmoreland and Abrams and author of *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975* an operational history of the conflict.

<sup>24</sup>Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore; The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 164-165.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 253-255.

<sup>26</sup>Sorley, *A Better War*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., xiii.

The cornerstone of his thesis is the massive transcription of ‘The Abrams Tapes’. These recordings captured the meetings of General Abrams and his subordinates during briefings in Saigon. More recently he shifted his focus to the shortcomings of General Westmoreland during his period of command.<sup>28</sup>

The effect of Lewis Sorley’s work was magnified exponentially in light of the war in Iraq. According to David Ignatius of The Washington Post, *A Better War* could be “found on the bookshelves of senior military officers in Baghdad.”<sup>29</sup> Lewis Sorley himself cites the influence of his work on current American counterinsurgency doctrine and believes that General David Petraeus applied the lessons of General Abrams while conducting operations in Iraq.<sup>30</sup> The contrast between Sorley and Krepinevich ensured that this would not be the last word on the operational approach that was taken in Vietnam.

Andrew Birtle criticized Sorley in The Journal of Military History in October 2008. The gist of his criticism was Sorley’s interpretation of “A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of South Vietnam” (PROVN). Birtle maintains that General Westmoreland was as adept at understanding counterinsurgency as General Abrams and “that the Army’s conventional orientation was not a straightjacket that predetermined its actions in Southeast Asia.”<sup>31</sup> The criticism of Sorley’s influence on contemporary policy has also been reflected in the writings of

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<sup>28</sup> Eric Tegler, *How Westmoreland Lost Vietnam An interview with Lewis Sorley, author of Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, [www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/how-westmoreland-lost-vietnam-4](http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/how-westmoreland-lost-vietnam-4)/ November, 2011. (accessed 25 October 2012)

<sup>29</sup> David Ignatius, “A Better Strategy for Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 4 November 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Tegler, *How Westmoreland Lost Vietnam An interview with Lewis Sorley, author of Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, [www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/how-westmoreland-lost-vietnam-4](http://www.defensemedianetwork.com/stories/how-westmoreland-lost-vietnam-4)/ November, 2011. (accessed 25 October 2012)

<sup>31</sup> Andrew J. Birtle, “PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal” *The Journal of Military History* October 2008, 1247.

Gian Gentile, a veteran of the war in Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

This support and criticism will be the subject of scrutiny in the monograph. The monograph will examine the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam during the period of 1966 and 1967, when General Abrams became General Westmoreland's deputy commander. The operations in the Central Highlands (Operations SAM HOUSTON and FRANCIS MARION) and the Iron Triangle (Operations CEDAR FALLS and JUNCTION CITY) were specifically designed to attrite Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular forces as outlined in the 1966 meeting. The Tet offensive of January 1968 appeared to discredit the strategy of attrition and led to the ouster of Westmoreland and his replacement by General Abrams.

While these operations were being conducted the national command authority adopted the policy of Vietnamization in the summer of 1969. The training of South Vietnamese forces was predicated on their capability to conduct attrition warfare upon the departure of American forces. The proof of principle was Operation LAM SON in 1971. This operation reflects the emphasis placed on conducting offensive attrition based operations rather than population security and pacification.<sup>33</sup>

The monograph will utilize the primary source reports of the effected commands at the division level and above. The staffs and officers who fought the Vietnam War at an operational level left vast amounts of documents and statistics which provide some insight into the conduct of operations. These documents are particularly useful when utilized in conjunction with the official histories published by the United States Center of Military History and the papers of Generals

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<sup>32</sup> Gian Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters* Volume XXXIX, no. 4 (Autumn 2009): 5.

<sup>33</sup> James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (United States: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 48-49.

Westmoreland and Abrams. By placing the raw statistics in context with the contemporary reports, it will be seen how modest the change in approach was. However, this does not affirm the argument of Andrew Krepinevich; attrition as an operational approach in counter-insurgency remains useful and relevant.

In conclusion this monograph emphasizes the continuity of American strategy in the Republic of South Vietnam. Despite claims of a radical shift to counter-insurgency and pacification operations, General Abrams continued a consistent strategy he inherited from his predecessor; in turn he passed it on to the South Vietnamese. The implications of this conclusion are twofold. The first is that any limited success achieved by the United States Armed Forces in South Vietnam was a result of attrition not counter-insurgency. The second is that a change in leadership in a theater of limited war may be cosmetic and not reflect new ideas and policies, but merely a change in personalities.

The monograph will be presented chronologically, using contemporary reports and operational summaries of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam. Contemporary newspaper accounts and speeches by prominent officials will also provide context. This monograph also considers the importance of American and South Vietnamese troop strength and disposition. Finally it will consider contemporary secondary sources and their interpretation of the post-Tet period of the Vietnam War

The first chapter of the monograph will focus on the roots of the attrition strategy as it was developed in 1965 and 1966, with its full implementation in 1967. The following chapter will discuss the transition between General Westmoreland and General Abrams in the midst of the Tet offensive. Subsequently this paper will discuss the strategy of attrition as practiced by General Abrams and as inherited by the South Vietnamese. The paper will close with a discussion of the implications of the continuity of the strategy on the conduct of the war in Vietnam and future conflicts.

## THE WESTMORELAND COMMAND OF MAC-V

General William Westmoreland arrived in Vietnam on January 27, 1964 to begin his term as Deputy Commander and eventual Commander of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) from General Paul Harkins.<sup>34</sup> For the next four years he would command United States and Free World forces in the Republic of South Vietnam. This was a joint command which would involve elements of the United States Marine Corps and the United States Air Force. He did not have command of the United States forces which were conducting operations over North Vietnam from Thailand and the South China Sea. These operations were under the control of Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, the Commander in Chief of Pacific Forces, based in Honolulu, Hawaii.<sup>35</sup> At the time of General Westmoreland's arrival strategy, goals and options were in disarray in South Vietnam and there were hopes that he could salvage the situation.<sup>36</sup>

General Westmoreland had extensive experience in conventional military operations in his service prior to his arrival in Saigon. The most formative moments for a soldier occur in combat and his experiences in the Second World War and the Korean War may have shaped the operational approach that he took as a commander in South Vietnam. These experiences validated the efficacy of firepower and mass to attrite an enemy and set the conditions for his eventual

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<sup>34</sup> Ernest B. Furguson, *Westmoreland The Inevitable General* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), 294.

<sup>35</sup> Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV; The Years of Escalation, 1962-1967* (Washington D.C., Center of Military History, 2006), 306.

<sup>36</sup> There has been extensive literature discussing the events of the fall of 1963 in Saigon, which led to the United States supported coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, the President of South Vietnam and the disagreements between Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge (anti-Diem) and General Paul Harkins (pro-Diem). While integral to understanding the roots of American escalation, these events had little bearing on the operations conducted by MACV in subsequent years.

defeat. These lessons were learned as the Division Artillery Executive Officer and Chief of Staff of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during Operation OVERLORD, and as the commander of the 187<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment during the waning days of the Korean War.<sup>37</sup>

The 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was engaged in almost continuous combat from their arrival in the Normandy beachhead to the Siegfried Line campaign and the eventual surrender of Nazi Germany. General Westmoreland (then a Colonel) was the Chief of Staff of the division during their controversial battle in the Hurtgen Forest. This battle was notorious for the perceived lack of imagination and its fruitless results.<sup>38</sup> The First Army, of which the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was a part, suffered 47,000 casualties during the nine month campaign and had only pushed twenty-two miles into Germany.<sup>39</sup> While this sacrifice is today deemed excessive, this was not the case in the 1960s.

The official history of the campaign, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, was published in 1962. The conclusions that historian Charles McDonald drew from the campaign were quite different from those of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. McDonald stated, “The fact is that the Siegfried Line Campaign, for all its terrible cost, paid off, not so much in real estate as in attrition of German armies … just how effective would be apparent only after the unfolding of action in the Ardennes and a renewed Allied drive to the Rhine”<sup>40</sup> The conclusion that can be drawn from this work was

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<sup>37</sup>Furguson, *The Inevitable General*, 141-156 and 205-222.

<sup>38</sup>Russell F Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*. (Indianapolis:Indiana University Press 1981), 273. Weigley is critical about the lack of maneuver as is Charles Whiting in his work, *The Battle of Hurtgen Forest* which specifically notes that Westmoreland (incorrectly reported as a regimental commander) learned nothing from the battle.

<sup>39</sup>Charles B. MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993), 616-617. It is important to note that Charles MacDonald assisted GEN Westmoreland in compiling his memoirs and according to Lewis Sorley in *Westmoreland, The General Who Lost Vietnam*, was essentially his ghost writer.

<sup>40</sup>MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 622.

that a maneuver victory can only be achieved after the attrition of enemy forces, this echoes the prior experience of the Normandy buildup and breakout. This was especially the case in a theater which constricts maneuver such as a beachhead or a static front.

Years later General William E DePuy who served as a division commander and the operations officer of MACV under Westmoreland articulated this point in an article for Infantry Magazine. “People talk a lot about attrition versus maneuver. This is not an intellectual choice. The same generals who so brilliantly dashed across France were suddenly forced back into conducting attrition warfare. Nobody doubts that General George Patton preferred maneuver, but maneuver warfare is not a doctrinal choice; it is an earned benefit.”<sup>41</sup> The lessons of attrition that were learned in Europe during the Second World War were reinforced and reevaluated in a limited land war in Asia during the 1950s. The German Army had to be ground down in the hedgerows before Operation COBRA could succeed. The Chinese were only forced to the bargaining table after the massive casualties they incurred in Operation RIPPER and as a result of the UN counter-offensives of early 1951.<sup>42</sup>

General Westmoreland played a limited role in the conduct of the Korean War. He held a prestigious command, but it served as a theater reserve and only briefly spent time in the front lines.<sup>43</sup> The official history again provides some contemporary insight into the strategy of attrition as practiced in the Korean War. According to Walter Hermes in *Truce Tent and Fighting Front*,

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<sup>41</sup>William E. DePuy, *Selected Papers of William E. Depuy*. Compiled by Richard M Swain. Edited by Donald L. Gilmore and Carolyn D. Conway (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1995), 471.

<sup>42</sup> Billy C. Mossman, *Ebb and Flow, November 1950-July 1951*. (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1988), 495. The author quotes Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall’s testimony to Congress on May 8 1951, “if we destroy their best trained armies … it seems to me you develop the best probability of reaching a satisfactory negotiator basis with those Communist Chinese forces.”

<sup>43</sup>Furguson, *The Inevitable General*, 219-221.

published in 1965, the commanders of United Nations forces in Korea had to balance the need to pressure the Communist forces while suffering a minimum of friendly casualties.<sup>44</sup> The Army did not have the luxury of incurring the high level of casualties which occurred in the European Theater of the Second World War. To maintain domestic support the conduct of attrition would have to emphasize not only massive enemy casualties but minimize friendly ones. The commander of United States ground forces during this period of attrition was General Maxwell Taylor, long-time mentor of General Westmoreland.<sup>45</sup>

This background shaped Westmoreland as he assumed his new task. The fight to sustain the territorial integrity of South Vietnam presented its own challenges which would not necessarily mirror his past experiences. In brief the United States had become involved in Indochina following the collapse of French colonial rule in the aftermath of World War II. As a result of the Geneva Conference of 1954, Vietnam was divided into a communist North and a western aligned South Vietnam. The United States established a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in 1950, which morphed into the Military Assistance Command Vietnam in 1962 after North Vietnam accelerated attempts to overthrow the South Vietnam government through internal and external means. By the time of Westmoreland's arrival as the deputy commander of MACV it appeared that South Vietnam was on the verge of losing its war.

At the close of 1963 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara visited South Vietnam and gave his appraisal to newly sworn in President Lyndon Johnson. It was a very pessimistic report. According to Secretary McNamara the relationship between General Harkins and Ambassador Lodge had broken down completely, the Viet Cong had taken control of most of the countryside

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<sup>44</sup>Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent to Fighting Front* (Washington DC:Center of Military History, 1992), 507-508.

<sup>45</sup>Furguson, *The Inevitable General*, 232-235.

and that infiltration of North Vietnamese men and equipment was occurring along trails through Laos and Cambodia. Significantly, “the infiltration problem, while serious and annoying, is a lower priority than key issues discussed earlier.”<sup>46</sup> The key issues which he discussed earlier were counter-insurgency focused.

According to the Secretary of Defense the issues were the South Vietnamese dysfunctional government, the dysfunctional United States Country Team, and the progress of Viet Cong insurgents in the area surrounding Saigon, the capitol of South Vietnam. The solutions that were proposed to the President were a re-allocation of South Vietnamese forces to the areas around Saigon, augmentation of American staffs, and the preparation of new pacification plans. He significantly did not propose a substantial increase of United States personnel.<sup>47</sup>

Westmoreland was thus initially ordered to continue the current practices of the MACV,<sup>48</sup> but it was hoped he would get along better with Ambassador Lodge, and that his reports would more accurately reflect the situation on the ground.<sup>48</sup>

The initial plan proposed by Westmoreland was pitched as a classic oil spot counterinsurgency strategy as developed by counter-insurgent theorists since the close of the Second World War.<sup>49</sup> The plan would also be nested in the guidance that Secretary McNamara had shared with the President at the close of 1963. Accordingly this strategy focused on the area immediately surrounding Saigon (the oil spot) and on building a new pacification strategy which

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<sup>46</sup> Robert McNamara, “Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, Memorandum for the President, ‘Vietnam Situation,’ 21 December 1963.” Documents Relating to the Vietnam War. [www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam.htm](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam.htm) (accessed Nov 13, 2012)

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Cosmas, *MACV: The Years of Escalation*, 122-124.

<sup>49</sup>William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City:Doubleday & Company, 1976), 98. Advocates of the oil spot include the British theorist Robert Thompson and French theorist David Galula.

was labeled HOP TAC.<sup>50</sup> HOP TAC translated into co-operation and encouraged the South Vietnamese government to take the lead in conducting pacification operations. The South Vietnamese would accelerate civilian programs in the area surrounding Saigon, including a greater police presence, more accessibility to government goods and services, and in general improve life in the area around Saigon.<sup>51</sup> This operation was scheduled to begin in October of 1964, a new pacification strategy in accordance with the views of the Secretary of Defense, which General Westmoreland briefed to Secretary McNamara in June.<sup>52</sup>

On the surface Operation HOP TAC appeared to be a pacification operation in line with the definition proposed by Andrew Birtle. General Westmoreland saw a significant military aspect to pacification, and this aspect would be refined into the operational approach of attrition. In his memoirs Westmoreland relates that his staff found three terms or phrases which encapsulated his thoughts on the operations he wished to conduct. In his words:

The first was “clearing” which was either destroying or driving out the guerillas and other military forces so that the civilian agencies could begin their assignments. The second was “securing,” which was holding onto a cleared area by means of outposts and patrols, at the same time attacking any vestiges of the guerillas and uprooting the secret political infrastructure. The third was “search and destroy,” which was nothing more than the infantry’s traditional attack mission: locate the enemy, try to bring him to battle, and either destroy him or force his surrender.<sup>53</sup>

These tactical concepts were not dependent on the presence of United States Army combat battalions, MACV wanted these operations to be conducted by the armed forces of South Vietnam.

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<sup>50</sup>Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, 99-101

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

The year 1964 was frustrating for Westmoreland and the rest of MACV. There was no measurable progress as was noted in the end of year summation by the MACV staff. “The insurgency could not be countered with forces available to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) … active offensive measures were beyond the ability of the RVNAF – however augmented, strengthened, supported or advised by US or other friendly forces.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, the solutions proposed by Secretary McNamara were not feasible due to the inadequacy of South Vietnamese forces, the acceleration of North Vietnamese involvement, and the resulting failure to pacify the countryside. The Gulf of Tonkin incident in August and the increased level of attacks on American servicemen inside of South Vietnam signaled that a change in strategy was in order.<sup>55</sup>

This change in strategy was also requested by the United States Ambassador to South Vietnam, Maxwell Taylor, in a brief to General Harold K. Johnson, the Chief of Staff of the Army. Taylor blamed the lack of security in South Vietnam on “(1) lack of satisfactory progress in destroying the VC, (2) the continuing capability of the VC to replace losses and increase their strength, and (3) our inability to establish and maintain an effective government.”<sup>56</sup> The lack of RVNAF success was linked to inadequate force ratios which could be solved by increasing the capability of South Vietnamese forces, or by increasing the level of United States troop commitment.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff, *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1964* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1964), 169.

<sup>55</sup>Cosmas, *MACV: The Years of Escalation*, 167-170.

<sup>56</sup>The National Archives. *Evolution of the War. U.S. Programs in South Vietnam, November 1963-April 1965: NASM 273 – NSAM 288 –Honolulu.*, 104. [www.arcweb.archives.gov/](http://www.arcweb.archives.gov/) (accessed 15 November 2012)

<sup>57</sup>Ibid, 105.

The new American forces committed to Vietnam along with the soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) would conduct operations designed to attrite Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. The ARVN was specifically “charged with the mission of destroying or driving off organized VC forces from areas planned for pacification; harassing VC bases and LOC’s; controlling the borders of RVN.”<sup>58</sup> This runs counter to the emphasis on pacification which was a hallmark of the HOP TAC plan. The newly arrived American battalions would follow the guidance issued on 30 August 1965. This envisioned a three phase operation in which attrition would play the primary role, with pacification becoming the primary approach during Phase III.<sup>59</sup>

The word attrition was not used in the guidance but the, “objective was to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US.”<sup>60</sup> This was based on the “assumption that the VC would fight until convinced that military victory was impossible and then would not be willing to endure further punishment.”<sup>61</sup> In 1965 American force levels had not reached the level at which they could assume pacification operations, they had to “halt the losing trend.”<sup>62</sup> 1965 would see an initial defensive effort followed by a shift to the offense by most subordinate commands.

Westmoreland repeatedly emphasized that, despite the vulnerability of logistic bases, the

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<sup>58</sup> Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff, *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1965* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1965), 60.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.,141.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.,142.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.,141.

war must be taken to the enemy. His initial statements to Admiral Sharp appear to hold out the hope of being able to secure the populace through the use of maneuver in sparsely populated areas of the country without resorting to a war of attrition. In fact his initial statements read as a classic statement of counter-insurgent doctrine. He agrees with Sharp that, “there is no doubt whatsoever that the insurgency in South Vietnam must eventually be defeated among the people in the hamlets and the towns”<sup>63</sup> The newly arrived American units would work in conjunction with the South Vietnamese reserves to use their, “mobility, communication, and fire power” to defeat the elusive enemy.<sup>64</sup> Simultaneously, the line South Vietnamese divisions would conduct the security of the towns.<sup>65</sup> Therefore the American forces would be used to defeat North Vietnamese regulars and “hard-core” insurgents, preferably through mobility and fire power while the South Vietnamese Army would take the lead in counter-insurgency. The discovery that mobility was limited at the tactical level, despite the introduction of helicopter borne troops, would lead to the reliance on attrition.

The first attempts by the United States Army<sup>66</sup> to use mobility to defeat the Communist forces began in earnest in the fall of 1965. Operation SILVER BAYONET was a month long operation conducted in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam to, “provide security and artillery support to ARVN forces around Plei Me.”<sup>67</sup> The Airmobile 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division was assigned the

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<sup>63</sup> Telegram From the Commander, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Westmoreland) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp), [www.presidency.uscb.edu/vietnam/showdoc.php?docid=120](http://www.presidency.uscb.edu/vietnam/showdoc.php?docid=120) (accessed 26 November 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Earlier in the year, the United States Marine Corps had begun offensive missions in the I Corps Area of Operations. OPERATION STARLITE would result in approximately 700 Viet Cong KIA. See *Command History, 1965*, 176-177.

<sup>67</sup> *Command History, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 1965*, 168.

operation which quickly morphed from the static defensive mission at Plei Me into a devastating battle in the Ia Drang valley which lasted from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of November. From the American perspective the battle was viewed as a great success resulting in the infliction of 1200 communist soldiers killed in action (KIA) at the cost of 217 American lives.<sup>68</sup> GEN Westmoreland commented that “American casualties were heavier than any previous engagement but small by comparison with the enemy.”<sup>69</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division withdrew leaving the remaining enemy to survive and fight another day.<sup>70</sup> The American army could not sustain maneuver, even with its airmobile assets, long enough to disintegrate North Vietnamese forces.

The North Vietnamese regulars who opposed the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division were assigned the mission “to destroy an important portion of the puppet army, liberate the North Central Highlands (initially Kontum), and cut Route 19.”<sup>71</sup> Twenty-five years after the battle the senior North Vietnamese general saw it as a great victory in which the North Vietnamese Army had forced “the enemy to fight on our terms, in our way.”<sup>72</sup> However he also admitted that their casualties were heavy and that “temporary problems,” forced his units to build up support areas for the next six months.<sup>73</sup> It would seem that both adversaries would be unable to use maneuver to defeat their enemy, the result would be a shift to the approach of attrition.

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<sup>68</sup>Command History, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 1965. 169.

<sup>69</sup>Cited in Command History, United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam, 1965, 169.

<sup>70</sup>John M. Carland, *Stemming the Tide May 1965 to October 1966*. (Center of MilitaryHistory United States Army:Washington D.C, 2000) 146-147.

<sup>71</sup>Senior General Chu Huy Man with Senior Colonel Le Hai Trieu, “Time Of Upheaval” translated by Merle Pribbenow (Hanoi, People’s Army Publishing House, 1990), 415 [www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe](http://www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe) (accessed 30 November 2012).

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 428.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 440.

The shift from maneuver to attrition began shortly after Operation SILVER BAYONET, when Secretary McNamara visited Saigon on 28 November 1965. The shift may have occurred as a result of the denouement of the battle of Ia Drang. According to General Kinnard (in an interview published in 1998) he sought to pursue North Vietnamese forces across the border into Cambodia but was denied permission.<sup>74</sup> The official After Action Review of the Division published in 1966 indicates that the enemy was “destroyed” but they estimated 1000 survivors had retreated into Cambodia.<sup>75</sup> This unsatisfactory outcome would have been discussed at the November meeting in Saigon, the results of which called for the introduction of 40 new combat battalions to the theater in 1966.<sup>76</sup>

In 1966, General Westmoreland explicitly outlined this guidance to all components of the force, US Army and Marines, Republic of Vietnam Forces, and Allied Forces from the Republic of Korea. “Our operations must be oriented toward the destruction of these forces and we must undertake an effective war of attrition against them. We have not yet adequately exploited our great advantage in mobility and firepower”<sup>77</sup> This message from General Westmoreland predates the results of a 1 July Honolulu Conference between Westmoreland, the Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC) Admiral Sharp and Secretary of Defense McNamara. The output from the conference was six goals. The first of which stated, “Attract by year’s end, VC/NVA forces at a

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<sup>74</sup> Harry Maurer, *Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1998), 145.

<sup>75</sup> *Operations Report-Lessons Learned, 3-66- The Pleiku Campaign* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Chief of Staff for Force Development, 1980), 156.

<sup>76</sup> The National Archives, *Evolution of the War. U.S. Ground Strategy and Force Deployments, 1965-1967 Vol.1.25.* [www.arcweb.archives.gov/](http://www.arcweb.archives.gov/) (accessed 15 November 2012).

<sup>77</sup> Msg (S), COMUSMACV 07760, 11 May 1966 Cited in Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff. *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1966.* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1966), 344. Declassified by the Defense Technical Information Center, June 16 1986.

rate as high as their capability to put men into the field.”<sup>78</sup> Surprisingly, in the next sentence CINCPAC, “felt that this goal would not be achieved because of the enemy’s demonstrated ability to increase his forces despite losses.”<sup>79</sup> In addition the goal of attrition was seen as detrimental in achieving the second goal to, “increase the percentage of VC/NVA base areas denied the VC from 10-20 percent to 40-50.”<sup>80</sup> Based on this gloomy prospect for success, why did the leadership in Washington, Honolulu and Saigon pursue this strategy?

The answers lie in the desire to keep the Republic of Vietnam Armed forces focused on pacification without interference from attacks by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. The CINCPAC planning conference of January 1966 concluded that operations,

“against VC/PAVN forces and base areas attrite VC/PAVN main forces and destroy VC base areas and in-country supplies. These operations, although contributory to, are not part of the rural construction effort, per se, but are constituted concomitantly with it. It is clear that a known and expected VC/PAVN build up, the prime focus of combat capable units of US/FWMAF and RVNAF forces must be directed toward the search and destroy effort.”<sup>81</sup>

The planners determined that the only way to keep the Regional and Popular Force militias focused in the villages of South Vietnam,”their proper role,” the main force units of the United States and the capable units of ARVN had to bring the fight to the enemy.<sup>82</sup> The limitation imposed by the borders of Cambodia and Laos meant that these main force units would be restricted in their ability to maneuver and destroy the adversary.

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<sup>78</sup>*Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1966.* 347.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Although under BGEN Hube Wass de Czege’s model of operational approach, the second goal would still fall under the attritional approach. *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1966,* 347.

<sup>81</sup>Cited in The National Archives. Evolution of the War. U.S. Ground Strategy and Force Deployments, 1965-1967 Vol.1.34. [www.arcweb.archives.gov/](http://www.arcweb.archives.gov/) (accessed 15 November 2012).

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 35.

This decision to preserve South Vietnamese forces in order to allow them to conduct pacification operations was enacted in 1966. However according to Major General DePuy, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division in an address to the Army War College in March 1967, this ideal was not being met:

“For some reason or another people feel it would be easier for Vietnamese to do that kind of fighting, but I can assure you that it takes a better battalion of infantry to patrol seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with squads and platoons and companies than it does to go out every three months and have a big Hoedown with the Viet Cong … the leadership potential in the Vietnamese army is not up to it. … **If we can get the problem down to where there are fewer guerillas around and the problem is less, the danger is less there will come a time when they can do it.** … So, it really boils down to the fact that the United States forces go after the big boys when it appears profitable to do so or it is necessary to drive them back into the jungle and immediately go right back into the populated area and go to work.”<sup>83</sup>(emphasis added)

This analysis led DePuy to conclude that there was no “other war” being conducted. His division would conduct a war of attrition against the main force elements of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong when they presented themselves,<sup>82</sup> and continue a war of attrition in the towns when the main force elements displaced.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division employed attrition in the built up areas with little regard for traditional pacification measures. “You can sit and write extremely clever leaflets, broadcasts and appeals, and nothing will happen unless you combine it with a tremendous amount of military pressure.”<sup>84</sup> DePuy advocated repetitive cordon and search operations in conjunction with Vietnamese soldiers and police. He did not specify if the South Vietnamese forces were regular soldiers or Popular Front or Regional Front troops. These repetitive tactical actions resulted in

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<sup>83</sup>William E. DePuy, “Lecture of Opportunity- ‘Vietnam’ “*Selected Papers of William E. Depuy*, 51.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.,51.

large numbers of Viet Cong detained and pressured others to surrender.<sup>85</sup> These measures adopted in 1966, large unit battles conducted primarily by American forces, and smaller tactical actions conducted by American and South Vietnamese forces in varying proportions would persist until 1970. After 1970 the lead would be taken by South Vietnamese forces but the approach would remain the same, “destruction of the enemy’s military forces over time in a series of perhaps unrelated battles and campaigns.”<sup>86</sup>

1966 would close with the largest search-and-destroy operation to date. Operation ATTLEBORO would involve six American Brigades for 72 days of battle north and west of Saigon. The final tally of killed in action would be 1,106 communist forces killed in exchange for the loss of 115 Americans.<sup>87</sup> These numbers, whatever their veracity, would indicate to Westmoreland’s headquarters that the ratio of casualties was favorable to the United States and would lead to an eventual victorious outcome. This outcome would not be in the near future, “the enemy had increased his strength by some 42,000 during 1966, leading to the conclusion that, despite known losses, the enemy had been able to achieve a counter-buildup proportional to the growth of US/FWMA forces.”<sup>88</sup>

The campaign plan for 1967 re-iterated the approach which had been followed in 1966, but with a significant shift which echoed DePuy’s speech. “The primary mission of the US/FWMA was to destroy the VC/NVA main forces … increased emphasis was to be given to identifying and eliminating the VC infrastructure and to small unit operations designed specifically to destroy the enemy guerilla force. These operations were to be characterized by

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<sup>85</sup>Depuy, “Lecture of Opportunity,” 51.

<sup>86</sup>Bartholomees, “The Issue of Attrition,” 9-10.

<sup>87</sup>*Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1966*,845.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.,59.

saturation patrolling ... by both RVNAF and US/FWMA forces.”<sup>89</sup> There were two other important changes in emphasis that Westmoreland gave in his guidance to field commanders in January 1967.

The first was a shift of emphasis on the destruction of enemy soldiers, to a destruction of enemy support areas the other element of the attritional approach. “Of particular importance in our strategy is the focusing of our effort on the enemy base areas and supply systems ... If we can neutralize the enemy base areas and prevent replenishment of the material captured or destroyed, we will have taken a long stride toward ultimate victory.”<sup>90</sup> This plan would come to fruition in Operation CEDAR FALLS, which hoped to destroy enemy logistics capability west of Saigon in order to disrupt enemy attempts to interfere with pacification in the heavily populated areas closer to Saigon.<sup>91</sup> This parallels and anticipates operations on enemy rear areas during the Cambodian incursion of 1970.

The after action review provided by the participating units anticipates the same conclusions which American forces reached after the raid into Cambodia. “A major portion of the enemy’s base and control center for operations against the Capital Military District has been destroyed. This represents the loss of an investment of twenty years ...The enemy’s offensive capability against the Capital Military District has been reduced by loss of personnel, equipment and facilities.”<sup>92</sup> The ARVN also contributed airborne and ranger battalions to the operation,

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<sup>89</sup>Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff. *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*. (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1967), 319.

<sup>90</sup>Msg (S), COMUSMACV, 241227Z Jan 67, Subj: Command Guidance (U). Cited in *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 327. Declassified by the Defense Technical Information Center, June 16 1986.

<sup>91</sup>*Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 368.

<sup>92</sup>*Combat After Action Report- OPERATION NIAGARA/CEDAR FALLS, Period 5-26*

much as they would in 1970.

The second was a change to the anticipated role of South Vietnamese forces. It was stressed that they would be expected to contribute not just to pacification, but that they had a role in the attritional battle as well. “RVNAF must be made to realize that there are military tasks as well as non-military tasks associated with RD. Every influence must be used to get RVNAF to cease conducting an intermittent war and instead to maintain continuous pressure on enemy forces.”<sup>93</sup> This foreshadows the eventual role which ARVN would assume following the Tet offensive, a shift from pacification to attrition warfare. In May, General Creighton Abrams who would continue and elaborate this strategy arrived in South Vietnam to assume his role as Deputy Commander of the United States Military Assistance Command-Vietnam.

#### THE ABRAMS COMMAND OF MAC-V

General Creighton Abrams was appointed Deputy Commander as a result of a conference between Secretary McNamara, Admiral Sharp, and General Westmoreland. The intent was to move Gen Abrams into the command seat after an unspecified length of time. In the interim General Abrams would take the lead in the development of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces, serve as the Commander MAC-V in the absence of Westmoreland, and incidentally served as a field force commander during the height of the Tet offensive.<sup>94</sup> Abrams brought a depth of experience to match Westmoreland, and an inherent likeability which surpassed Westmoreland’s.

*January 1967 (U) Dated 18 June 1968, 110-111.*

<sup>93</sup> RD stands for Revolutionary Development, the title given to pacification efforts from 1966-1968. *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 328.

<sup>94</sup> Cosmas, *MACV: The Years of Escalation*, 277.

GEN Abrams was a veteran of the European Theater of Operations from June of 1944 to the end of the war in May of 1945. Abrams served at the battalion and regimental level throughout the campaign and featured prominently in the breakthrough to Bastogne as part of the Battle of the Bulge. Subsequently, he served as a Chief of Staff at the Corps level in the waning days of the Korean War. In the early 1960s he served not only as a combat commander in Europe, but also in the support of the federal government during the sensitive issue of desegregation of schools in Mississippi. General Abrams was serving as the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army when he was appointed to his posting in Vietnam.<sup>95</sup>

General Abrams is almost universally extolled by all of his contemporaries. Lieutenant General Philip Davidson who served both Westmoreland and Abrams as G2 MACV wrote, “He had probably the best mind in the army during his prime (1960-1974).”<sup>96</sup> General Bruce Palmer Jr. who served as deputy to Westmoreland and Vice Chief of Staff to Abrams in Washington said he, “was in the heroic mold of folklore and there will never be another quite like him in the US Army.”<sup>97</sup> He also noted an important contrast between the two generals, “Westmoreland constantly worried about his public image and assiduously courted the press. Abrams … was indifferent about his appearance, acting as though he could care less about the press. The sharply different results were startling; Abrams rarely received a bad press report, Westmoreland struggling to get a favorable one.”<sup>98</sup> This advantage was important throughout his tenure in Vietnam.

The experiences he brought based on his actions in the Second World War, were also

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<sup>95</sup>Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975*, 576-577.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.,577.

<sup>97</sup> Palmer, Jr., *The 25-Year War*, 133.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 134.

markedly different from those of Westmoreland. The success of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in France and Germany was based on mobility and the disintegration of the enemy's forces.<sup>99</sup> The terrain and the same constraints faced by Westmoreland would preclude mobility and prevent disintegration despite the attempts to achieve it in Cambodia and Laos, which will be examined further. The experiences he gained in Washington may be more useful in understanding his

performance in Vietnam. General Davidson described the skillful way he prevented the crisis at the University of Mississippi when the institution was integrated as the “defusing of a bomb. If the officer defuses the ‘bomb’, that is gets the job done well, promotion and prestigious assignments follow rapidly.”<sup>100</sup> By the middle of 1967 the War in Vietnam was rapidly losing popularity and the leadership of MAC-V would require as much political as military skill.<sup>101</sup>

This was not the view point of Westmoreland in late 1967. In Planning Directive 9-67 he stated that, “The war has passed the point at which losses inflicted on the enemy exceed his current replacement input. Except along the DMZ where the war has developed a conventional character, the enemy is resorting to terrorist activity and hit-and-run attacks.”<sup>102</sup> As a result of the perceived success of attrition the emphasis would now shift to, “(1) offensives to keep the enemy

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<sup>99</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *The Last Offensive* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993), 205. As mentioned earlier Charles MacDonald played a prominent role in the writing of General Westmoreland’s memoirs, served as the first official historian of Vietnam, and was the most prominent military author on the American role in the Second World War in Europe through at least the early 1970s. The importance of his interpretations and their impact on the Army’s understanding of its history merit further study.

<sup>100</sup> Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History 1946-1975*, 577.

<sup>101</sup> As early as June 1966, Gallup polls indicated that 48 percent of the public believed sending troops to fight in South Vietnam was a mistake. William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1962-1968*. (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1990), 262.

<sup>102</sup> COMUSMACV Planning Dir No.. 9-67 (U), 29 October 67. Cited in *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 343.

off balance; (2) persistent neutralization of enemy base areas with methodical capture/destruction of his supplies and facilities; and (3) improved and expanded territorial security and other pacification programs.”<sup>103</sup> Due to this change in emphasis: “Hence, tactics will stress long-range patrolling in and around TAORs and integrated operations by military, paramilitary and National Police Forces in populated areas.”<sup>104</sup> The fruits of attrition would not be limited to purely military activities.

Westmoreland continued to elaborate his vision in the document. “The concerted efforts of the entire military-civil team are required to accelerate improved security conditions ... Planning, as a matter of priority, will provide for the opening and securing of land and water LOCs to enhance inter community contacts, increase friendly presence in the countryside and permit uninterrupted flow of civil/commercial traffic.”<sup>105</sup> This priority could only be secured by continuing the multi-brigade offensives into enemy base areas with an increased cognizance of the para-military threat which had been assessed.<sup>106</sup> The Tet offensive would delay the shift in tactics but not prevent it. It is hard to distinguish this assessment and strategy from that pursued in 1969-1970. The difference is not the approach but the lack of a simple phrase to comprehend the approach like “one-war” and his inability to express it to the press.

In November 1967, General Westmoreland returned to the United States to conduct updates on the war to the American public. During these briefings he explained the strategy and approach which he had taken over the last year and the plan for future operations. “Our strategy I

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<sup>103</sup> COMUSMACV Planning Dir No.. 9-67 (U), 29 October 67 Cited in *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 344.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid.

<sup>105</sup>Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

would define as follows: to secure our bases ... to control populated and productive areas... to neutralize his base areas ... to force the enemy back ... next to interdict infiltration and finally to inflict maximum attrition on his ranks.”<sup>107</sup> He elaborated on what attrition meant to him: “when he loses one man it’s equivalent to our loss of more than ten.”<sup>108</sup> When a reporter asked him to explain this rationale, he responded based on population ratios. The North Vietnamese had, “a man-power base of approximately 20 million and we have 200 million. It’s that simple.”<sup>109</sup> This response puts the burden of attrition on the American soldier. General Abrams would shift the attritional burden onto the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, without changing the approach.

The fighting in the months prior to the press conference sparked the optimism of the press conferences. Chief among the battles of the fall were those in Dak To. Dak To lay astride a major North Vietnamese infiltration route at the intersection of the borders of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in the Central Highlands region of South Vietnam. The genesis of the battle occurred in October when a large NVA force was identified in the area. By the end of the month the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had deployed a brigade headquarters to the area.<sup>110</sup> In a cable to the Pentagon on 12 November 1967, General Westmoreland reported favorably on the course of the battle. “Were the enemy looking for a war of attrition this month, he picked the wrong place. Some typical kill ratios in the Second Corps for October were: Bolling (12:1); Pershing (16:1);

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<sup>107</sup> William Westmoreland Press Briefing at the Pentagon 22 November 1967, 4-5. Douglas Pike Collection:Unit 01-Assessment and Strategy Item Number 2120908026. [www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu](http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu) (accessed 10 December 2012).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>110</sup> John Prados, *Dak To: One Hell of A Fight*. The VVA Veteran-January/February 2012. [Digitaledition.qwinc.com/iphone/article.php?id=955944&id\\_issue=97710&src=&ref](http://Digitaledition.qwinc.com/iphone/article.php?id=955944&id_issue=97710&src=&ref), 27-30.

and Francis Marion (65:1)."<sup>111</sup> These ratios were what informed his briefings upon his return to Washington on November 15, 1967.

General Creighton Abrams took up the supervision of the battle upon Westmoreland's departure. On 18 November the battle reignited in the fiercest struggle in the war to date. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 503 Infantry Regiment became decisively engaged in clearing a hill complex. In the first twenty four hours of the assault the battalion suffered seventy-one killed out of a reported strength of 330.<sup>112</sup> The battalion was reinforced by its sister battalion and additional elements of two other divisions. The fight reached its culmination point on 23 November. The total amount of enemy killed during the month long fight was 1,644. The American Army and their ARVN allies lost 344 killed in action with an additional 1,441 wounded, leaving a much less favorable kill ratio than what had been reported earlier in the month.<sup>113</sup>

The results of the battle of Dak To signified a change in the American perception of the struggle, and left an impact on the way General Abrams would conduct the war upon his assumption of command. Abrams left Major General Ray Peers, the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Commander, in control of the battle which was logical due to the depth of his experience and knowledge of the current situation. In a report to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Abrams gave his assessment: "the battlefield in Kontum resembles a chessboard ... (we) use ... all other means to locate the enemy when found maximum firepower is put on him. I believe when the enemy comes forth from Cambodia or Laos with his principal formation looking for a fight we

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<sup>111</sup>William Westmoreland, Text of Cable From General Westmoreland:Monthly Military Assessment.

<sup>112</sup>Prados, *Dak To:One Hell of a Fight*, 30.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.

must go out and fight him.”<sup>114</sup> The positive assessment of American success in the battle was not matched in the reporting which was being read in Washington at the time.

In contrast to the many optimistic reports at the time of the battle of Ia Drang, the view two years later was extremely pessimistic among main stream news publications. Typical of the reporting was an article in *Newsweek* published the week of 4 December 1967 entitled “Thanksgiving at Dak To”. The author editorialized, “Not since the fighting in the Ia Drang valley two years ago had the US troops taken such a beating, and, inevitably, questions arose: was Hill 875, held for most of the battle by no more than a reinforced company of North Vietnamese, worth such a price? Why, indeed were the paratroopers fighting there at all?”<sup>115</sup> According to the writer it was part of a North Vietnamese strategy to lure American units to fight large battles in the country side in order to take pressure off of the Viet Cong in the cities. From this perspective many pundits believed that the operational approach of attrition was being matched by the North Vietnamese skill at maneuver.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, the North Vietnamese were becoming more and more successful in their approach of disintegration of enemy morale.

Additional controversy was sparked by the accusation that a battalion of American soldiers had been surrounded by the Viet Cong. In retrospect, this controversy seems strange as there had been many cases of surrounded American soldiers holding off destruction until rescue by their comrades. These situations were seen as triumphs of American courage and tactical skill such as the rescue of the Lost Battalion in the First World War, and the liberation of Bastogne in the Second. In the politicized atmosphere of 1967, this was no longer the case. The *Newsweek*

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<sup>114</sup>General Creighton Abrams, Letter to General Earle Wheeler, 22 November 1967. [www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/vva/servlet.starweb](http://www.virtualarchive.vietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/vva/servlet.starweb) (accessed 2 January 2013)

<sup>115</sup>“Thanksgiving at Dak To,” *Newsweek*, December 4, 1967, 24.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid, 27.

article amongst numerous other contemporary accounts described the surrounded battalion at Dak To.<sup>117</sup> Instead of using the situation as an opportunity to emphasize the heroism of the soldiers in a difficult battle, it was vehemently denied that American troops had been cut off. General Abrams sent a message, “With respect to friendly troops being ‘trapped’. At no time have US or ARVN troops been considered trapped, cut off, or surrounded in the current battle around DAK TO.”<sup>118</sup> The important legacy of the battle was not whether the press or the Army was correct in their respective accounts. It signified the failure of the current operational approach in the mind of the public. Indeed, many articles focused on the contrast between Westmoreland’s up beat press briefings and the somber mood from Dak To. Prior to the Tet Offensive it had become impossible to sell the operational approach of attrition to the American press and by slow extension, the public.

The events of the next few months would confirm the views of the press and public regarding the perceived failure of General Westmoreland’s approach. The Tet Offensive of January-February 1968 further undermined the morale of the American public and brought the matter of strategy to a head. The offensive was designed to create a massive uprising in the Republic of South Vietnam by attacking provincial capitals throughout the nation. Additionally attacks on the Marine outpost at Khe Sanh and the heart of American power in Saigon were conducted to wound American morale.<sup>119</sup> The MACV Headquarters summarized the events thusly: “The Tet Offensive, like Khe Sanh, was a costly military failure. … the enemy had lost an

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid, 27.

<sup>118</sup>General Creighton Abrams, Message from General Abrams –re: Battle Around Dak To, 22 November 1967. [www.virtualarchivevietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/vva/servelet.starweb](http://www.virtualarchivevietnam.ttu.edu/starweb/virtual/vva/servelet.starweb) (accessed January 2, 2013)

<sup>119</sup>Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff, *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1968* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1968), 1.

estimated 37,000 KIA. Nevertheless, he was quick to claim a psychological victory ... and in many areas of the world ... the psychological effect was noticeable.”<sup>120</sup>

This was the environment that General Abrams entered when he assumed command on 3 June, 1968. The North Vietnamese had suffered considerable casualties particularly among their second and third tier forces in South Vietnam. These National Liberation Front forces would remain weak for the duration of the war. If the enemy capabilities had undergone an extensive change, the American strategy had changed even more radically. On March 31, President Johnson announced that America would seek to de-escalate the war and that he was, “ready to send its representatives to any forum ... to discuss means of bringing this ugly war to an end.”<sup>121</sup> The military leadership concurred with this decision and it would now be the responsibility of the commander in Vietnam to translate this new guidance into operations that would support the intent of a negotiated peace with the existence of South Vietnam assured.

General Abrams first priority was to prevent the threatened enemy attacks on South Vietnamese towns and cities as part of the so-called mini-Tet offensive of May. General Abrams was responsible for coordinating the response to this new communist initiative while simultaneously conducting all of the minutiae involved with his transfer of command from General Westmoreland. In the words of historian Ronald Spector, “both sides had repeated many of their mistakes of February and March in the bloody battles of May, and neither side appeared much closer to victory. Yet now the Communists were beginning to run short of men and the Americans were beginning to run short of time.”<sup>122</sup> The results of the approach of attrition were

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<sup>120</sup> *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1968* 1.

<sup>121</sup> Cited in Graham Cosmas, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and The War in Vietnam 1960-1968, Part Three*. (Washington D.C.:Office of Joint History, 2009),171.

<sup>122</sup>Ronald Spector, *After Tet; The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York, N.Y.:The Free Press, 1993), 183.

clear to both sides by the summer of 1968, the communists had suffered casualties that were now growing difficult to replace and as a result of the bloody battles the American forces had run out of time.

General Abrams operational goal would be to accelerate the pace of attrition in the limited time that was available. On the day after he officially took command, he defined his problem, “Is there a practical way to cause significant attrition on him while he’s in this condition? Or while he’s doing this kind of thing? Is there any way to get at him, get a hold of him? Because that’s – the payoff is getting a hold of this fellow and killing as many of them as you can.”<sup>123</sup> The goal was to kill as many of the enemy as possible across the battlefield, whether in built up or rural areas and regardless of who was killing the enemy. This included ARVN. Abrams was disappointed at their kill levels and blamed it on a lack of equipment. “The ARVN doesn’t have the firepower, it doesn’t have the mobility, it doesn’t have the communications.”<sup>124</sup> Additionally local South Vietnamese security forces would focus on killing Viet Cong political cadres. The One-War concept was attrition at every level.

While the approach remained the same the method would be captured under the title of the Accelerated Pacification Program. General Abrams gave initial guidance prior to the fall of 1968. “Each commander was directed to expand his spoiling and preemptive operations, i.e., attacks against the enemy main and local forces, base areas, infiltration routes, LOCs, to include an intensive drive against the VC infrastructure and political apparatus aimed at eliminating it as

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<sup>123</sup>General Creighton Abrams, Commanders Conference, July 4 1968. Taken from Lewis Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles: The Abrams Tapes 1968-1972* (Lubbock, TX; The Texas Tech University Press, 2004) 12. The Abrams Tapes were transcribed by Lewis Sorley as part of his research for *A Better War*, many of the tapes remain classified. While an excellent resource, Sorley has a strong proclivity to General Abrams and a distaste for General Westmoreland which may have influenced what he deemed important to transcribe.

<sup>124</sup>General Creighton Abrams, Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update, 14 September 1968. Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 48.

rapidly as possible.”<sup>125</sup> He realized that there was an opportunity to destroy North Vietnamese main force units while simultaneously destroying the political wings in the towns and villages. To destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure General Abrams began to lean heavily on William Colby, the civilian head of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Program (CORDS).

The relationship between General Abrams and William Colby was cordial and productive. This was a contrast with the relationship that General Westmoreland had with Colby’s predecessor Bob Komer. General Davidson recalled that Westmoreland did not have much interest in the fight against Viet Cong infrastructure and that he left Komer to handle pacification with little interference.<sup>126</sup> This is the crucial difference in Abrams employment of attrition. He would focus on the destruction of not only main force units in the countryside but also kill the structure in the towns. General Abrams expounded on the subject in an intelligence update on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 1968 when he discussed the importance of the infrastructure in the towns, “You wipe that part out, and goddamn it, if he’s got 50 divisions it’s not going to do him any good.”<sup>127</sup> The success of the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was dependent on three elements; the growth of American and South Vietnamese combat power, a change in tactics, and a more subtle way of controlling the American press.

At the start of 1967 the United States Army had four infantry divisions, five separate brigades and an armored cavalry regiment, a total of 244, 712 personnel.<sup>128</sup> The United States

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<sup>125</sup> *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1968*, 33.

<sup>126</sup> Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Nebraska:Bison Books, 2007), 49.

<sup>127</sup> General Creighton Abrams, Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update, 12 October 1968. Cited in Sorley Vietnam Chronicles, 64.

<sup>128</sup> *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 135.

Marine Corps provided two additional divisions with a strength of 68,767.<sup>129</sup> The ARVN contributed 11 additional divisions along with separate brigades giving them an assigned strength of 283,898.<sup>130</sup> The Regional and Popular Forces nominally contained 300,000 additional forces.<sup>131</sup> Taken together General Westmoreland had close to 600,000 soldiers, not including the militia elements to conduct his operations in 1967. These forces were augmented throughout the year, but no new major subordinate commands were fully operational until the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division closed to assigned locations in December of 1967. By the time of the Dak To battles there were approximately 70,000 more American troops in Vietnam.<sup>132</sup>

When General Abrams launched his operations in the fall of 1968 the numbers he had available were considerably augmented. As the year ended he had 359,313 American army personnel and 80,716 Marines in South Vietnam. This was an increase of over 100,000 soldiers from the start of operations in 1967 and an increase of 50,000 from the command which he held temporarily during November 1967.<sup>133</sup> The growth of the ARVN kept pace with a reported strength of 387,250 at the end of 1968.<sup>134</sup> The Regional and Popular Forces were estimated to have grown to a nominal strength of 393,000<sup>135</sup> Therefore; the MACV had the capability of employing over 800,000 soldiers at the end of 1968. Moreover the increased American numbers included the airmobile capable 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and an additional ad-hoc division, the

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<sup>129</sup> *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1967*, 159.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>132</sup> United States Army, 314,470. United States Marine Corps, 78,013

<sup>133</sup> *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1968*, 225.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 342.

America. This impressive growth in combat power is sometimes lost in the midst of the debates on troop strength which dominated contemporary newspaper accounts and subsequent histories.

This growth in combat power enabled General Abrams to more efficiently kill the enemy. These tactics were described in great detail by Lieutenant General Julian Ewell in his monograph, *Sharpening the Combat Edge* which was published in October 1973, while General Abrams was serving as the Chief of Staff of the Army. Ewell served as the commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during 1968 and 1969. Subsequently he became the commander of II Field Force (de facto corps commander) responsible for the southern half of South Vietnam.

General Ewell described his change in tactics as a shift from search and destroy to constant pressure. Under search and destroy operations his units conducted large battalion sweeps into large base areas, killed many enemy personnel and destroyed logistics. However, American forces would then recover at base camps which would allow the communist forces to regroup.

Additionally by 1968, the Vietnamese were becoming more adept at avoiding the large search and destroy sweeps. The constant pressure tactic was almost self explanatory. Instead of large unit sweeps, the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division broke down into smaller elements that covered large areas preventing the enemy ability to reconstitute his forces. As General Ewell wrote, “by adopting tactics which not only bled the enemy, but worked against his classic mode of operating, one could make impressive gains.”<sup>136</sup> However, it is important to note that the success of the new tactics was directly linked to the growth in combat power. The division had gained over 33 percent increase in rifle strength through reinforcement and reorganization.<sup>137</sup> Again according to General Ewell, “**When the division reached its full strength**, it was possible to put the pressure

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<sup>136</sup> Lieutenant General Julian Ewell and Major General Ira Hunt, *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgement* (Washington D.C.: The Department of the Army, 1995), 83.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.,18.

on the enemy continuously and conduct small encirclements with troops on hand.” (emphasis added).<sup>138</sup>

This emphasis on small unit tactics was not necessarily the case throughout the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Andrew Birtle conducted extensive statistical research on the nature of the tactics conducted by General Westmoreland and General Abrams in his article for Military History, *PROVN, Westmoreland and the Historians: A Reappraisal*. The conclusion he reached was that MACV battalions spent as many days conducting large-unit operations under the command of both leaders.<sup>139</sup> However, a large-unit operation is not a strictly definable term, and the increase in the number of battalions may account for the number of total operations regardless of size. According to General Abrams in 1969, “the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, the 25<sup>th</sup> Division … they’re all operating about here in platoon-size and smaller forces: You see, they’re really deployed on top of all this. And what they’ve been killing in here are the rear services types.”<sup>140</sup> Therefore it appears that the surge in troop strength allowed for smaller unit operations in addition to the large scale operations still being conducted against North Vietnamese regular forces. Whether operations were large or small the goal was still to wear down communist forces.

From the moment he took command General Abrams inherited the difficult relations the MACV had with the national media. The negative reporting on the battle of Dak To, particularly its condemnation of battles of attrition may have had an impact on the way Abrams dealt with the press. The label Accelerated Pacification Campaign was in itself a way of obscuring the true nature of the operation. The pacification goal could only be achieved after the Vietnamese

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<sup>138</sup> *Sharpening the Combat Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgement*, 79.

<sup>139</sup> Andrew Birtle “PROVN, Westmoreland and the Historians”, 1230.

<sup>140</sup> General Creighton Abrams Briefing for General Bonesteel 8 August 1969. Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 245.

communists had been worn down in a series of bloody battles. According to William Hammond, contemporary reporters viewed pacification as requiring, “patience, time, and understanding … a marked contrast to the search and destroy techniques favored by Westmoreland.”<sup>141</sup> As previously discussed the Accelerated Pacification Campaign was designed to rapidly wear down enemy forces, pacification in the villages would be a direct result of destruction of the enemy. General Abrams emphasized the ends of pacification in contrast to the means, which were battles of attrition.

The difficulty General Abrams had was transferring the responsibility for the strategy to the Army of South Vietnam upon the departure of American forces. As the Accelerated Pacification Campaign morphed into the 1969 Pacification and Development Campaign, the nation’s strategic leaders emphasized the need to hasten the development of the ARVN. This guidance was summarized in a statement by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in a statement to the Commander in Chief Pacific on 21 August 1969. General Abrams was to conduct “military operations designed to accelerate improvement in the RVNAF and to continue to provide security for US forces.”<sup>142</sup> The last three years of his command would be focused on this task and this is how his performance should be judged.

It is Lewis Sorley’s thesis that, “there came a time that the war was won.”<sup>143</sup> He dates this time as the fall of 1970 and he quotes various leaders of the time remarking on the general tranquility of the countryside. His argument that the internal war against the Viet Cong had been

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<sup>141</sup>William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*. (Washington DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 24.

<sup>142</sup> Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1969* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1969), II-4

<sup>143</sup>Sorley, *A Better War*, 217.

won is on the whole correct. His argument that the war against the external threat was also defeated is flawed. He writes that under the terms specified by the United States, the South Vietnamese were capable of defending themselves with the aid of United States air and naval power. He references the Easter Offensive as proof of this.<sup>144</sup> However the Easter Offensive and its precursor, the Lam Son operation in Laos show that the ARVN was incapable of defending itself, due to its dependence on attrition warfare which it was incapable of conducting in the absence of United States combat troops.

In the spring of 1971, the combat elements of the United States army had been reduced by a third of the force that was present in 1969. There were three remaining division size elements along with three separate brigades/regiments for a total of 284,000 combat troops.<sup>145</sup> The ARVN “could not replace the redeployed United States and other free-world forces on a numerical basis.”<sup>146</sup> There were ways of obscuring the short fall of ARVN personnel numbers. In July 1970 South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu reorganized the Armed Forces and put the Regional and Provincial Forces under the command and control of the ARVN.<sup>147</sup> On paper this made it appear that the Army of South Vietnam now had over a million men under arms. In reality the ARVN had a reported strength of 416,609 in January 1971, an increase of only 29,000 since the end of 1968. At the same time over 230,000 American soldiers and marines had left the

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<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 218-219.

<sup>145</sup>James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (United States:University Press of Kansas, 2004) 48-49.

<sup>146</sup>Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Lam Son 719* (Washington D.C.: US Army Center of Military History, 1979),3. General Hinh was a division commander in the ARVN.

<sup>147</sup>Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff, *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1971* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1971), VIII-22.

theater.<sup>148</sup>

The capability of the South Vietnamese to conduct offensive operations was severely compromised by the loss of valuable American support and the large size of the Regional and Provincial Forces. The RF/PF was not organized to conduct the large scale, long duration, geographically vast operations that the war called for at the start of the 1970s. As noted earlier, the pacification battle was won in the fall of 1970, but over half of the South Vietnamese forces were still dedicated to it. Moreover, the ARVN that had been built in the previous two years was structured to fight as a force dependent on formations of dismounted infantry supported by vast amounts of firepower, rather than a balanced mechanized force with air mobile capability. In other words it was an Army built for pacification first, with the hope that it could conduct a competent static defense in the future. There was no emphasis on flexibility and mobility, which would allow the ARVN to reinforce endangered positions and launch credible counter attacks.

This problem of a balance between the ability of the South Vietnamese to conduct territorial security and offensive operations was apparent as early as 1969 in reports by Lieutenant General Charles Corcoran and Lieutenant General Ray Peers commanders in the First Field Force.<sup>149</sup> According to Corcoran's advisers in the fall of 1969, "their counterparts tended to avoid maneuver, shy away from the offense and fight from fixed positions, where they could use massive U.S. artillery and tactical air support to destroy the attacking forces with limited loss to themselves"<sup>150</sup> Despite these limitations there was a desire by the MACV commander to push the ARVN into pitched battles along the border to attrite North Vietnamese regular forces in order to

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<sup>148</sup> Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 49.

<sup>149</sup> Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1988) 400.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

disrupt planned offensives. These battles would now be conducted in Cambodia and Laos due to a lifting of political restrictions by the Nixon administration.

The Cambodian incursion was a combined operation launched in May of 1970 with 20,000 American soldiers and 30,000 South Vietnamese. The operation disrupted North Vietnamese regular forces in the border areas with South Vietnam, and was adjudged a success by the participants. This optimism did not reflect the reality on the ground, particularly the capability of the ARVN to conduct a combined arms attack against the enemy. The view point of General Abrams was reflected in a boisterous commanders meeting on 23 May 1970. “The Vietnamese have been really inspired by this chance to get into Cambodia and tear around in the base areas … They’ve got the enemy off balance … They’re practically drunk with power. If they can come back into South Vietnam and apply all this enthusiasm and vigor and initiative … to the drudgery of pacification, the drudgery of the jungle and the base areas, then we’ve got something.”<sup>151</sup> The statement did not present a true evaluation of ARVN performance, or of the shift in North Vietnamese tactics.

In Jeffery Clarke’s account of ARVN performance in the invasion, he praises their ability to conduct mobile operations without extensive American support. However, in following paragraphs he makes it clear that the North Vietnamese made no effort to cut ARVN supply lines, that air mobility was still almost entirely dependent on American helicopters, and that ground forces still relied on American tactical air and heavy artillery bombardment.<sup>152</sup> It is hard to square this deficiency in ARVN capability with the optimism of MACV and Sorley’s belief that the ARVN was a capable force at the end of 1970. This deficiency would become acute during the

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<sup>151</sup> General Creighton Abrams, Weekly Intelligence Estimate Update, 23 May 1970. Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 424.

<sup>152</sup> Clarke, *Advise and Support*, 420.

LAM SON 719 operation in the late winter of 1971.

The intelligence that MACV received from North Vietnamese documents also had a detrimental effect on the focus of the Americans and South Vietnamese. Captured documents such as Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN) Resolution 10 emphasized the continuing guerrilla struggle, and fed into the belief of MACV that the emphasis had to remain on the destruction of Viet Cong cadres, rather than preparing ARVN for the conventional fights that it would be engaged in. American intelligence determined that there was “an emphasis on a return to guerilla activity, particularly against the GVN’s pacification program, came through strongly. There was also specific mention of the desirability of “destroying” a U.S. mobile unit, South Vietnamese regular units, and People’s Self-Defense Forces.”<sup>153</sup> The role of COSVN remains murky to this day, but the analysis of COSVN documents added to the belief that the war would be won by destroying guerilla forces in the towns and wearing down North Vietnamese logistic support on the borders.

LAM SON 719 was a logical extension of the perceived success in Cambodia. The role of Laos in supplying North Vietnamese troops became more critical in light of the closing of the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia. The goal of LAM SON 719 was to inflict maximum damage on North Vietnamese Base Area 694 and 611 prior to the start of the monsoon season in March/April. The operation would have ARVN forces entirely in the lead with American forces providing logistical and fire support. In concept it was no change from the missions into logistical areas that had been the hallmark of MACV operations since 1966. Indeed General Hinh describes it as a search and destroy mission in his monograph. The only change was the location,

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<sup>153</sup> *The Study of COSVN Resolution 10*. October 1971., vi-vii  
www.virtual.vietnam.ttu.edu/cgi-bin/starfetch.exe?JDFHH.63NASyT3cTSAbah (accessed 3 February 2013)

Laos and the lead actor, ARVN.<sup>154</sup>

The operation was conducted in February 1971. After an American clearing operation the best units in ARVN I Corps crossed the Laotian border to seize Tchepone and destroy enemy forces in the Base Areas. After making fast initial progress, the South Vietnamese forces were strongly counterattacked by four North Vietnamese Divisions. The presence of American fire support and helicopters greatly assisted the South Vietnamese in killing large numbers of North Vietnamese soldiers and eventually breaking contact as they returned to South Vietnam. According to James Willbanks, “an objective assessment of the Laotian Campaign lies somewhere between Nixon’s public pronouncements about the success of the operation and the U.S. media’s portrayal of complete debacle.”<sup>155</sup> The more important conclusion that he drew from the battle was that, “South Vietnamese combat performance, had been at best, uneven, and at worst poor.”<sup>156</sup>

It is ironic that Lewis Sorley evaluates LAM SON 719 as a limited success. He based this evaluation almost purely on the amount of North Vietnamese killed and the number of units destroyed. In short, the attrition of North Vietnamese regulars was more important than the disappointing performance of the ARVN. General Abrams believed that LAM SON 719 might be the big battle which would destroy North Vietnamese power. In an update on March 9, 1971 he stated: “I’m just more and more convinced that what you’ve got here is maybe the only decisive battle of the war. And they’ve got a chance to – it’ll be hard – a chance to really do it. There’s all kinds of prophets of doom on this thing. But when he elects to commit all of that to try to do battle, and he knows damn well he has never come through – when we’ve focused firepower on

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<sup>154</sup>Hinh, *Lam Son 719*, 33-35.

<sup>155</sup>Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 111.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., 112.

him, he hasn't been able to hack it.”<sup>157</sup> There are similarities here to General Westmoreland's views on Khe Sanh or even French General Henri Navarre's on Dien Bien Phu.

The real weakness in LAM SON 719 lies beyond the capability of South Vietnamese forces and the ability of American forces to destroy North Vietnamese forces by using fires. The operation devolved into a frontal assault by an inferior force along a highway against a prepared defense. The total available forces for ARVN were ten regimental equivalents, while the North Vietnamese had ten. These figures were known at the time. The sole route to Tchepone was narrow and unimproved which made it difficult for the minimally trained armored force to use and was quickly overwhelmed by non-combat vehicles. To resupply forces away from the roads required a vast amount of aerial resupply which could only be supplied by American forces. The operation would have made sense if it was a raid. It would also have been logical if the trail could have been permanently severed. LAM SON 719 was another battle fought to attrite North Vietnamese forces in order to disrupt North Vietnamese offensive plans. Other than location and friendly composition it was identical to the means that were used at Dak To four years earlier.

It is difficult to determine if the battles of LAM SON derailed North Vietnamese offensive plans for the remainder of 1971, or if the North Vietnamese were not planning on a major offensive regardless of South Vietnamese actions. The Nixon administration interpreted the results of LAM SON 719 as a signal of the success of Vietnamization. Whether this was a cynical move to ensure that American casualties would be limited prior to the election of 1972 or an over optimistic hope for victory, the COMUSMACV would have to prepare the ARVN for a large offensive in 1972. Indications throughout 1971 were for a massive enemy attack early in 1972. Despite the warnings of a massive conventional attack, the South Vietnamese and MACV

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<sup>157</sup> General Creighton Abrams, COMUSMACV Update, 9 March 1971. Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 424.

persisted in keeping over half of their forces in local reserves (RF/PF) rather than filling out the regular ARVN forces.<sup>158</sup>

The North Vietnamese gave indications of changing their strategy at the end of 1971. The goal of an unnumbered COSVN resolution, “called for a shift in the balance of power through the use of main force warfare and political initiatives.”<sup>159</sup> The usual verbiage of continuing the insurgency was included but this was no longer a possibility. Even General Abrams acknowledged this on 4 January 1972. “I want to drop ‘pacification’ out of this. What we are talking about now is efforts to undermine the authority, the influence, the presence of South Vietnamese government among its people, both urban and rural.”<sup>160</sup> The emergent threat of a massive North Vietnamese assault made the MACV headquarters uneasy, but there was no fear that with the aid of American firepower that the South Vietnamese would be able to defeat it.<sup>161</sup> There was no attempt, and realistically little time, to reshape the ARVN to face the threat.

However, in February 1972 General Abrams had a discussion with British counter-insurgency guru Sir Robert Thompson about what needed to be done to ensure that the ARVN had the manpower it needed, in the right jobs and at the right locations. It seems as if General Abrams was torn between the success he had in the villages and what he knew was necessary to succeed in the coming battle. “The reason the GVN’s gotten where they’ve gotten, while I never deprecate the necessity for regular forces – he’s going to have to have them as long as the other fellow’s

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<sup>158</sup> Sorley, *A Better War*, 304-305.

<sup>159</sup> Military History Branch Office of the Secretary Joint Staff, *Command History United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam 1972* (Alexandria VA: Department of the Army Information Management Support Agency, 1972), A-1.

<sup>160</sup> General Creighton Abrams, Southeast Asia Assessment, 4 January 1972. Cited in Sorley Vietnam Chronicles, 740.

<sup>161</sup> Dale Andrade, *Trial by Fire* (New York, N.Y.: Hippocrene Books, 1995), 26-30.

threatening him with regular NVA forces- but the reason the GVN's where they are is because they have built the territorials and they have built the police, and they have got this PSDF thing going, and so on.<sup>162</sup> There was definitely a reluctance to change the tactics from defeating guerillas to defeating regulars.

The Easter Offensive was launched on 30 March and lasted through the remainder of General Abrams command tenure. By some measures it only ended on 16 September when Quang Tri was recaptured by ARVN forces from the North Vietnamese. The course of the battle waxed and waned with the presence of United States support, whether in the form of advisors calling in fire and directing air strikes, or the strategic measures taken to deny the North Vietnamese regulars supplies from their communist allies.<sup>163</sup> The final results were again ambiguous. The South Vietnamese had prevented their nation from being conquered, but only with the assistance of American firepower and only by conducting static defense and frontal assaults to attrite the enemy.

By the height of the offensive, General Abrams became more critical of ARVN performance and compared it to American forces during the Tet Offensive. In a brief for General John Michaelis, commander United States 8<sup>th</sup> Army, he vented, “I’m not going to make any statements that the Americans were the (best?) here, but, I’ll tell you one thing – when you needed a battalion somewhere- goddamn! It could be grabbed and it went now!”<sup>164</sup> By the middle of May his frustration with the ARVN and their inability to maneuver had reached a breaking point. “I wanted to say a word about the use of air. In some places … the ARVN commander, he’s

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<sup>162</sup>General Creighton Abrams, COMUS and Sir Robert Thompson 2 February 1972. Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 740.

<sup>163</sup>Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 152-160.

<sup>164</sup> General Creighton Abrams, COMUS Special Brief for General Michaelis. 29 April 1972 Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 829.

got an idea you should use the air to kill all of the enemy. When I say all, I mean the last goddamn one, and then he will advance. ... But it just isn't going to kill all the enemy ... But they've got to maneuver, too. They've got to move.”<sup>165</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The final result of the Vietnam War was a decisive offensive conducted by the Army of North Vietnam culminating in the seizure of South Vietnam's capital Saigon. This was the ultimate failure of the operational approach that was pursued by the United States command. The victories that were achieved in both pacification and main force battles were not exploited. There was a failure to change the approach from one of attrition to disruption. Vietnamization had not succeeded in forging a force that was capable of fighting the North Vietnamese with any chance of success.

This monograph has shown the consistent application of combat power by the United States Armed Forces in an attempt to wear down the enemy within the borders of South Vietnam. The tactical method chosen was adapted based on the nature of ourselves, our ally, and our enemies. The Army battalions that fought at Ia Drang were certainly different in weapons, tactics and appearance than the Army advisors who assisted the South Vietnamese during the LAM SON operation. The operational goal remained the same, attrite the North Vietnamese regular forces so that they would be unable to conduct offensive operations in the populated areas of South Vietnam. The goals of pacification were also consistent.

General Westmoreland employed the HOP TAC plan with the goal of pacifying South Vietnamese forces through the use of ARVN forces. This proved to be unsuccessful until the enemy conducted the Tet offensive which severely damaged his insurgent forces. In the wake of

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<sup>165</sup> General Creighton Abrams, Commanders Brief 12 May 1972 Cited in Sorley *Vietnam Chronicles*, 839.

Tet, the Accelerated Pacification Program completed the task of dismantling the communist cadres that had begun in 1965. This consistent approach was successful but the credit can be equally divided between both commanders. The approach of attrition demanded patience and a willingness to sacrifice lives and treasure amidst the clamor of critics. General Westmoreland drew most of the criticism while General Abrams reaped the reward.

If General Westmoreland and General Abrams can both be praised and censured for attrition's success and failure, they must also share responsibility for the eventual failure of the South Vietnamese armed forces. The reluctance to utilize the South Vietnamese Army in an offensive role against the North Vietnamese regulars during the initial period of the war did not change until the Nixon administration forced the change. Once the new policy was put in place there was no attempt to develop an agile force that was able to disrupt the North Vietnamese. Instead a force was built that would attempt to destroy the North Vietnamese formations through firepower alone, even though this firepower was not organic. Both Generals acknowledged the problem, neither was able to alleviate it.

The outcome was ultimately based on the inability to take advantage of the “earned benefit” of attrition warfare. The window of time that was briefly opened in 1970 and 1971 after the destruction of the Viet Cong was unexploited. The time that was gained would have been more usefully employed in building a more capable ARVN force rather than shattering it against the North Vietnamese in Laos and the counter-attack of the Easter offensive. The cost of these battles of attrition was too high, particularly when it was obvious that the total number of forces defending South Vietnam would fall based on the American withdrawal. If General Abrams can be praised for the brilliant successes of the “one-war” which was conducted in 1969 and the spring of 1970, his conduct of operations in 1971 and 1972 has to be examined with a critical eye.

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